A SYNOPSIS OF THE DISSERTATION

"THE PROBLEMS OF THE SELF IN THE NOVELS OF ARUN JOSHI: A CRITICAL STUDY"

My attempt regarding the thesis is to explore the various Problems of the Self in the light of the analysis of the four novels of Arun Joshi (b.1939 & d.1993), an Indian English writer. Joshi's literary career began with the publication of *The Foreigner* in 1968. The other novels of Arun Joshi are The *Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and The River* (1990). He has to his credit a collection of short stories too, *The Survivor* (1975). He won the prestigious *Sahitya Akademy award* for his fourth novel, 'The Last Labyrinth' in 1982.

Notwithstanding the rich semantic multi-facetedness of the word 'self', it has acquired wide currency among scholars of philosophy and psychology. Some identify the self with intelligence, intellect as understood here is comprehensive enough to include thought, idea, memory, perception, reason and will. Intellect is an instrument for the self to use, however organically the two are connected.

Joshi's novels probe deep into the dark and innermost issues of the human mind, illuminate the hidden corners of the physical and mental make-up of the characters. In his fictional world, Joshi tries his level best to delineate the predicament of the modern man who is confronted by the self and the question of his existence. As a novelist exposing human predicament, Joshi visualizes the inner crisis of the modern man and finds and gets convinced that the most besetting problems that man faces today are the problems of the self, like alienation, identity crisis, sense of void and existential dilemma. These problems are so pervasive that they threaten to eat into every sphere of human activity. As a result, man fails to discern the very purpose behind life and the relevance of existence in a hostile world. When he handles these problems of the self, Joshi is careful enough not to bid good bye to our cultural heritage and imperishable moral values. His fiction explores self and brings to a central focus the way in which the self tries to assess its involvement in the alienation from the family and society.

Joshi's characters are mentally disturbed and filled with despair, self-hatred and self-pity, for they regard themselves as strangers in the physical world. Isolated from the self as well as the society and family, Joshi's characters are forlorn and tear themselves away from the velvety embrace of their society

and live like strangers. The struggle of the protagonist against social conventions and inner conflicts between what he really is and what society expects him to be, finds a pivotal place in Joshi's novels. For Joshi's protagonists, the society of the latter half of the 20th century has lost its meaning. They have no sense of belonging to the society in which they live. The live in their own world, thinking their thoughts, speaking to their own selves disappointed and depressed.

Arun Joshi is concerned with the predicament of modern man and is sensitively alive to the various dimensions of pressures exerted by the complex character and demands of the society in which contemporary man is destined to live. The protagonists of his novels are abject outsiders and stark strangers. The awareness of man's rootlessness and strangeness and the consequential quest for a meaningful self is the keynote of Joshi's novels. It is the inner crisis of the modern man that has occupied Arun Joshi's primary interest in his novels that are built around the dark and dismal experiences of the soul.

Though Arun Joshi's work has attracted serious critical attention, no single critical approach can really be adequate in analyzing the multi-faceted talent of a rare genius. Critics and scholars have discussed his fiction on the basis of evidence provided by his works, letters, and interviews etc., in order to

approach his work from different angles. Though attempts have been made to place his work on the existentialist, realist, modernist traditions etc., no specific attempt has been made to focus on the various problems of the self through the analysis of his novels. There has hardly been any attempt to study Joshi's fiction on the basis of the personality problems of his characters from a socio-psychological perspective. Though the attempt is a modest one, the issue is a crucial one, because in his novels he probes the depths of human experience to portray the repercussions of human conflict on the inner lives of his protagonists on the one hand, their psychological, social and religious effects on the other in a subtle manner. Whenever critics have touched upon the issue of Joshi's concern with the problems of the self, they have dealt with it very vaguely or left the discussion incomplete. Hence this study stands justified in its attempt to have a comprehensive search for the problems of the self. The study uses various disciplines like sociology and psychology in a flexible manner and in different combinations. The study attempts to broaden critical perspectives that allow a fuller understanding of Arun Joshi's fiction. The study also endeavours to expose the painfulness of human isolation and alienation by studying them at the familial and social levels and goes deep into the reasons for alienation from one's own self, community and family. The introductory chapter

of this dissertation attempts to make a general survey and criticism of Joshi's four major novels and a brief picture of the major influences on the author.

The second chapter examines specifically the sense of alienation and void experienced by the principal characters in the novels of Arun Joshi. Modern man finds himself estranged not only from his fellow men, but also from himself, having nothing to fall back upon in moments of crisis. He suffers from a gnawing sense of void and meaninglessness. In discussing the theme of alienation in Arun Joshi's novels, we are mainly concerned first with man's alienation from society which is the most prevalent kind of alienation and secondly his alienation from his own self. Arun Joshi's recurrent theme is alienation in different aspects and his heroes are self-centered persons prone to self-pity and escapism. In spite of their weaknesses, they are, however, genuine seekers who strive to grope towards the purpose in life and self-fulfilment. In his novels, Joshi attempts to deal with the various facets of the theme of alienation in relation to self, the society around and humanity at large. Arun Joshi's fiction is filled with the people who are alienated from themselves, from God and society. His fiction is a sincere effort to analyze his unique way of handling the theme of alienation. An attempt is made here to examine how best Arun Joshi tackles the problem of alienation in the modern Indian context.

Chapter three elucidates Joshi's depiction of the element of identity crisis manifested in the form of spiritual decline, moral degeneration, slothfulness and psychic perversions with special reference to the four novels. The need to feel a sense of identity stems from the very condition of human existence. Quest for identity is the reflection of any modern man who is without roots of any kind: social, spiritual, personal or any other. Identity crisis in general refers to psychological stress or anxiety about the sense of identity. A person undergoes the psychologically distressing experience when he feels that his personal identity is being spoiled or threatened. In short, identity crisis means the feeling of the loss of a sense of personal identity or depersonalization. When a person loses his sense of identity, he feels alienated and lonely and makes frantic effort to seek, organize and affirm his sense of identity.

Chapter four discusses the existentialist aspects in Arun Joshi's novels. Existentialist thinkers chose to define and describe the burning human experiences of anxiety, anguish, guilt, dread, despair, alienation, absurdity etc., of the post war world in their own ways. Their findings did exert tremendous influence on the thought pattern of the literary artists all over the world. There is a very pronounced impact of existentialism on Arun Joshi's writings. All his novels from *The Foreigner* to *The City and The River* have in them an

undercurrent of existentialist philosophy. Arun Joshi who is obsessively concerned with the human predicament explores the human psyche so as to unravel the mystery of the human existence. Like Sartre, Joshi is also primarily concerned with the action that is concrete and directed towards the individual who is free to choose for himself a personal way of life out of nothingness and vacuity around.

The fifth chapter dwells upon the fictional techniques that Arun Joshi employs in elucidating and establishing his themes. Joshi adopts the first person narrative technique in *The Foreigner*, *The Apprentice* and *The Last Labyrinth*. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, like Conrad's *Lord Jim*, is narrated from the witness-narrator's point of view. Another novel fictional technique that Arun Joshi resorts to is dramatic monologue. Joshi's novels are rather rich in imagery. Arun Joshi's is very good at similes and metaphors as well. One of the most powerful fictional techniques employed by Joshi is the technique of flashback or reminiscence. Joshi was also fond of the use of archetypes in his novels. Apart from using the image of labyrinth and void, Joshi explores the existential anguish with the help of the language of the dreams. The dreams function as a mirror which reflects the intricate workings of the inner mind of the characters.

These narrative devices and fictional techniques smoothly blend with Joshi's unique handling of the subject of the problems of the self.

Chapter six is the conclusion, which weaves together and sums up the themes of the previous chapters. It can be found that Joshi's vision does not limit itself to the meaninglessness and indeterminacy of the world. Amidst the pervading gloom and monotony of their universe, most of the protagonists of Joshi feel impelled to live in some acts of kindness and benevolence that ennoble human life. Just as Eliot proposes a conditional escape from the degenerate state of affairs, Joshi also presents at least a few examples of liberating human actions. Joshi's characters are true representatives of modern men who are engaged in the quest for the self and search for meaning in life.